

Quaker Business Method: A Contemporary Decision-Making Process?

“All Friends everywhere, meet together, and in the measure of God’s spirit wait, that with it all your minds may be guided up to God and receive wisdom from God”¹

Introduction

Friends have a long tradition in the world of trade and business, as discussed throughout this collection. While Quaker entrepreneurs from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Abraham Darby, Joseph Rowntree and George Cadbury continue to be studied widely today, the sustained influence of Friends on contemporary responsible business practice remains largely underexplored. In a Faculty publication at George Fox University, Anderson (1995), for instance, notes that “Quakers have influenced the field of business and other professions far beyond their numbers but the facts remain largely unnoticed”. While it is, frankly, a daunting task to try to capture the dense fabric of what characterises a ‘Quaker way’ of responsible business practice, the *theology* and *process* by which Friends conduct *Meetings for Business* deserves renewed attention given its potential relevance as a collaborative method of decision-making in today’s increasingly complex business organisations.

The term *Meeting for Business* often causes some confusion in the circles of Friends. In this Chapter, I distinguish between a ‘Meeting for Business’² – a ‘Meeting for Worship for Business’, and a ‘Business Meeting’ that typically occurs in contemporary business organisations, such as board meetings, project meetings, team meetings and the like. Later in this Chapter, I argue that the *process* that underpins a Meeting for Business in the manner of Friends has the potential to be transferable in full or part to contemporary business meetings, and may perhaps rapidly improve their inclusiveness and effectiveness. In other words, I argue that the Quaker Business Method (QBM) – a term applied to the decision-making processes of Friends (Sheeran, 1983) – has the potential to be transferable to modern management and organisational practice. In other words, I take up an optimistic position in this chapter.

QBM is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Friends’ broader approach to corporate governance, characterised as a participative, transparent and non-competitive method of decision-making (Velayutham, 2013). The corporate governance of the Religious Society of Friends is tightly bound to the theological roots and discipline of early Friends. The theology of Friends emerges from the belief of a ‘Light within’ that is available to everyone and a readiness to answer ‘that of God in every one’.³ As Friends believe in a direct and unmediated relationship with the Spirit or God⁴, it seems natural that traditional and human forms of hierarchy would be typically avoided, unlike many corporate governance models in the contemporary business world. In other words, Friends approach corporate governance is as a collective in order to make decisions, whether strategic or operational, local, regional or nationally. Quoted in Velayutham (2013:230-231), Roberts (1991, 1996) characterises the corporate governance of Friends as fundamentally different and distinct from the typical structure of many business organisations and highlights that hierarchical, Board-based forms

¹ Epistle 149

² Quaker Faith and Practice (2.88) reminds us that Meetings for Business are actually “meetings for worship for business”

³ Quaker Faith and Practice (19.32)

⁴ I will use these terms interchangeably throughout this chapter

of corporate governance are ‘individualising’, whereas the structures of the Society are, in contrast, ‘socialising’ and non-hierarchical, providing the framework for a powerful form of collectivised decision-making. With the contemporary business landscape arguably littered with examples of ‘poor’ decisions, what can the distinctive Quaker Business Method offer contemporary business organisations? Can collective and unitive decision-making help contemporary business organisations make ‘better’ decisions? Is the Quaker Business Method a hidden gem, bequeathed by early Friends, to contemporary business practice?

Spiritual roots

In our meetings for worship we seek through the stillness to know God’s will for ourselves and for the gathered group. Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God’s guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions. It is this belief that God’s will can be recognised through the discipline of silent waiting which distinguishes our decision-making process from the secular idea of consensus. We have a common purpose in seeking God’s will through waiting and listening, believing that every activity of life should be subject to divine guidance.⁵

QBM can be considered to encompass two broad dimensions: (1) a spiritual dimension described within the theology of early Friends, and (2) a decision-making process, tried, tested and refined by Friends for over 350 years (Anderson, 2006). Being distinctive, the process of decision-making may, to newcomers, seem unusual and idiosyncratic, often taking practice and participation over a long period to become accustomed to the nuances of the proceedings. Michaelis (2010:16), for example, argues that “...the discipline of Quaker business meetings is quite subtle and it is best conveyed through experience...”. However, despite its initial distinctive appearance, users of the method only require spiritual discipline and the right attitude to participate in a Quaker Meeting for Business (Grace, 2006:48). The spiritual dimension of QBM requires Friends to turn their attention to the Spirit as the source and authority in decision-making, relegating the role of human and individualistic authority. Friends understand that anyone present in the Meeting may experience ‘the leadings’ of the Spirit and this has an important effect on the way that Friends make decisions together in a process of ‘corporate discernment’.

The theological doctrine of early Friends is that “each person is capable of a personal, direct relationship with God” (Karkkainen, 2002:63). Quoting Grace (2000):

“... the living Christ is present to teach us Himself...Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is given in some measure to all people. This experience of the immediate presence of Christ, both personally and corporately, implies that we may be led by the Inward Teacher. Since Christ is not divided, the nearer we come to Him, the nearer we will be to one another. Thus the sense of being led into Unity with one another becomes a fundamental mark of the Divine work in the world.”

⁵ Quaker Faith and Practice (3.02)

As everyone has an unmediated access to the Spirit, then it follows that every participant at a Meeting for Business has the potential to contribute to the process of decision-making. By extension, every person present has the responsibility of waiting and listening to what the Spirit may say through him or her as part of the proceedings. Anderson (2006:29) eloquently describes the process of silent waiting and listening as thus “This means bathing the event in prayer and coming ready to put aside the distractions of our busied lives in order to listen intently to the gentle whispers of the Holy Spirit within and among us”. A Meeting for Business, therefore, is less about making an ‘efficient’ decision, and more to try to collectively discern the will of God.⁶ In other words, “A Quaker Meeting for Business is conducted in the context of worship, and with the same expectant waiting upon the Spirit as in the Meeting for Worship” (Grace, 2000). The process of corporate discernment, therefore, has a theological dimension that helps focus those present on a collaborative and cooperative approach to decision making in contrast to the highly-competitive and confrontational forms of decision-making widely used in corporate board rooms. As Grace (2006:48) notes, the corporate discernment process “...draws us closer to each other, closer to God, closer to the truth, and closer to a knowledge of right action in the world.”

Friends enter into a Meeting for Business to “Come with heart and mind prepared⁷” as early Quakers noted, and with the expectation that a ‘leading’ will emerge for those present. George Fox advised “Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive this strength and power from whence life comes to allay all tempests against blusterings and storms.” Fox eloquently draws attention to the importance of the right attitude and being sensitive to God’s leading such that “...this attitude is possible when Friends tune their mind to God and that even if the participants may be distracted in many ways, they will be empowered to overcome whatever might cause them not to understand and follow the will of God” (Niyonzima, 2013:13). When participants in a Meeting for Business wait in expectant silence “...with hearts and minds prepared and open, they can be gathered up by the Spirit to experience communion with God and with each other in a way that is not possible when praying or meditating alone. A time of covered worship is more than the sum of its individual participants” (Grundy, 2002:7).

The use of silence is an important characteristic of Meetings for Business, and uncommon within a wider cultural context where talk is often seen as synonymous with action (Molina-Markham 2014:155). Meetings for Business begin and end with periods of silence, allowing those present to open their hearts and minds to God’s guidance, rather than to focus on individual or selfish wishes or needs creating a powerful atmosphere for “attending, discerning, and minding the Divine Will” (Anderson, 2006:27). For Friends, “...silence can be discerned as having qualities such as: active, redemptive, nourishing, prayerful expectancy, an intensified pause and as a form of liberation. (Brigham & Kavanagh, 2015:4). In addition, silence can also be used *during* the proceedings. For example, short periods of silence between contributions give time for those present to reflect on their meaning and to consider whether their own individual ‘leadings’ can add to the process of corporate discernment. Second, short periods of silence may also reduce the risk of a confrontational, ego-based debate. Third, should proceedings become heated, the Clerk may request a period of silent reflection to help re-focus the Meeting to concentrate on discerning a unitive way forward. Thus, silence can have a calming effect on those present. Silence at the end of the Meeting may also help to provide a

⁶ Quaker Faith and Practice (2.89)

⁷ Quaker Faith and Practice (2.42)

reflective closure to the proceedings. In other words, Quaker business meetings are very different from more typical business meetings because silence is ever present. Law (1998:20) describes the character and use of silence as thus:

“It is not heavy and preoccupied, like the desperate hush of the exam room. Nor is it disciplinary and repressive, like the pressure that expands to fill the space of the parade ground where you hardly dare breathe. It is not the silence of the graveyard, with its imagined echoes and distant memories. Nor is it the silence you hear when you lie in the sun ... It is none of these, though perhaps the last of these comes closest to it. Instead it is, as they say a ‘centred’ silence”

In a Meeting for Business, there is, then, a shared understanding of the role of silence and in finding the sense of the meeting. Relying on a “sense of the meeting” offers a possibility for creating and sustaining a shared sense of community in decision making that may not be possible in other contexts when voting is used (Brigham & Kavanagh, 2015), a matter which I turn to next.

Unity or consensus?

Through the process of corporate discernment, the primary objective of a Meeting for Business is to reach *unity* rather than unanimity in its decision-making (Bradney & Cownie, 2000; Sheeran, 1983). As a social and collective process, decision-making via resolutions or the casting of votes is definitely *not* part of QBM. Decision-making via the casting votes may result in the perspectives of minorities being disregarded or overridden, as one ‘side’ claims numerical victory, while the other ‘side’ is defeated. In contrast, Meetings for Business aim to arrive at a *sense of the meeting*. Niyonzima (2013:16) highlights:

“Friends are not fundamentally opposed to democracy...Rather, the process is based on the understanding that God’s followers understand that they operate within a theocracy, not a democracy. The goal when Christians gather to make decisions is to listen to God’s voice: not to find what the majority can support, but find what those present understand to be God’s will.”

How is unitive decision-making conceptualised in the management literature? Typically, four styles of decision-making are envisaged: (1) an autocratic decision-making process in which the leader accepts responsibility for the outcome, (2) a democratic process that involves voting, (3) a collective participatory style where everyone is given the opportunity to provide input but the leader still makes the final decision, and, (4) a consensus process in which the leader understands that the group is responsible for the decision and everyone must agree (Leadership Management Development Center, 2013). However, is unity the same as consensus? Consensus is a word that is sometimes used to describe the characteristics of QBM. Yet, Friends often insist that unity and consensus is not the same thing. On the one hand, consensus is based on a notion of human reason and authority, and commonly understood as requiring mutual compromise between human beings; the decision taken must be agreeable to all present, or at least objectionable to none. Pollard (1954:5) rejects the notion of consensus, arguing that “Quakers reject debate on account of a number of defects: its assumption that man is a wholly rational being, its disregard of the unconscious, its tendency to establish controversial speech habits as fixed attitudes, its accentuation of antagonism and differences and the desire to beat the opponent. A desire to dominate...is absent...”. Anderson (2006:30) also asserts that the term consensus has a different meaning to Friends:

“...consensus is not simply a factor of compromise, wherein some give a little in one way, and others give a little in another. Modification of one’s understanding will indeed happen on the basis of one another’s input, but the goal is not to sort out one’s opinion by means of forcible jostling back and forth until the path of least resistance produces an outcome. Nor is it a quid pro quo exchange: “You come my way, and I’ll go yours.” Such are products of creaturely activity, not submission to the Divine Will.”

In contrast, unity and a ‘sense of the meeting’ is based on a spiritual and corporate discernment of God’s will. *Quaker Faith & Practice* (2.87) describes the spirit in which Friends make decisions, well-expressed by Edward Burroughs:

“Being orderly come together, proceed in the wisdom of God not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspoke and overreach one another in discourse, as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for domination, not deciding affairs by the greater vote, or the number of men, but by hearing and determining every matter coming before you, in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity.”

Friends’ belief in a fundamental difference between unity and consensus has far-reaching consequences. For example, a phrase heard in many board rooms is ‘what does success look like? Or ‘what are the critical success factors’? Here, again, Anderson (2006:31) highlights how unitive approaches decision-making redefine how success or failure in decision-making is conceptualised:

“this change in perspective causes us to redefine our understandings of “success”. Rather than seeing success in terms of material, bottom-line matters of the conventional world, success in the Kingdom of God involves lifting our sights to the higher goals of discernment, wisdom, understanding, conviction and commitment. Where Christ’s leadings are attended and discerned, that’s success! Likewise, “failure” is radically redefined. Rather than evaluating outcomes on the basis of popularity or outward measures, the more central question is whether Christ’s will was done and whether it was carried out in the loving spirit of his way.”

The role of human leadership

The higher goals of corporate discernment subordinate human authority and leadership. Those nominated who moderate and ‘clerk’ the Meeting are seen as facilitators of the corporate discernment process. Often, contemporary business meetings tend to be structured around a Chairperson who manages the meeting and a Secretary who produces minutes at some future point *after* the meeting. In contrast, in a Meeting for Business these two functions are combined into the role of a Clerk (or in the USA a Clerk and Recording Clerk), who both guide the Meeting and produce minutes in real-time. The Clerk is not there to ‘lead’ the Meeting in the traditional sense, present motions or oversee votes, and as Pollard (1954) highlights, the role of Clerk is certainly not a vehicle for the ambitious or for those who want to dominate proceedings. Moreover, “Those who come to meeting not so much to find the Lord’s will as to win acceptance of their own opinions may find their views carry little weight” (Willcuts, 1984:82). In one sense, perhaps the Clerk’s role is one of stewardship, rather than leadership as “leadership is seen as provided by the spirit, by God; and this leadership comes through the

clerk...Stewardship is perhaps a more accurate term than leadership to indicate the functioning of the person designated to convene and guide a particular committee” (Reis-Louis, 1994:48).

Clerks are appointed for a limited time, sometimes triennially, and the role of Clerk, and other roles, is often widely shared among the Membership of the Meeting. Grace (2006:50) highlights that “The Clerk has no formal authority of their own and cannot speak for the Meeting. Their task is to focus and enable the discernment of the Meeting by laying business before it in an orderly way, managing the pace and discipline of the discussion, listening for the Sense of the Meeting to emerge, restating that Sense in clear language and asking for approval, and recording the business in written minutes”. Cranmer (2003:187) similarly highlights that “The clerk combines the roles of convener and secretary, sharing with the elders responsibility for the 'right ordering' of the meeting. Right ordering has overtones of seemliness, dignity, and respect for tradition as well as 'doing things by the book.’”

To ensure right ordering, the Clerk will prepare an agenda, discerning whether a particular agenda item is ready for discussion or requires further shaping by a sub-committee or perhaps discussion at a Threshing Meeting. The agenda is also likely to encompass any matters of business held over from a prior Meeting where unity could not be discerned. However, despite the creation of an agenda, there is always sufficient room to remain open to new ‘leadings’ that may take the Meeting in a new direction, as “The sense of openness to new leadings in the group or individual must be cherished” (Vogel-Borne, 1990:9). However, Friends are often more likely to ensure any new concerns are discussed and nourished with experienced and respected Friends before raising them formally as an agenda item in a Meeting for Business. Friends will also want to come to a Meeting for Business informed about the agenda and issues, so that “...contributions will be seasoned with knowledge and perspective” (Anderson 2006:29).

However, in order to remain open to the ‘leadings’ of the Spirit, it is unusual for those present to pre-plan vocal ministry ahead of time, but rather to listen to God’s guidance as to whether there is a ‘leading’ to contribute. After all, many Friends would highlight that it is impossible to corporately know the will of God prior to the Meeting. Those present, as a consequence, expect that a new way will emerge from the proceedings of the Meeting (Grace, 2006).

The Clerk will open proceedings by inviting the Meeting to accept the agenda. Following this, agenda items are introduced, and the Clerk or a person present may introduce the issue or decision under consideration in a neutral manner, perhaps outlining a few options. Once a matter is ‘before the meeting’, the approach usually taken is to resist narrowing the options too soon (Anderson, 2006). If several Friends feel they are led to contribute, the Clerk determines who may speak and in which order, and may at an appropriate moment encourage someone to speak who has relevant knowledge or an important perspective but has remained silent. Via contributions to the proceedings, a creative process ensues and each person has a responsibility to contribute and not hold back, if they have a leading to speak. In fact, Friends are encouraged by the Clerk to contribute where they can so that a ‘sense of the meeting’ can be more properly discerned.

The spoken contributions are considered a form of vocal ministry (as in a Meeting for Worship) in which a person shares the leadings they have experienced. Friends are advised to listen to the words of other Friends speaking, imbued as they are with the Light. Moreover, Friends are

encouraged to thoroughly consider contributions before making any reply (Bradney & Cownie, 2000:73). Michaelis (2010:16) highlights that “Contributions are normally offered without strong emotion, making space for alternative points of view. However, sometimes a passionate contribution based in personal experience can be valuable, enabling participants to grasp some new significance or perspective in their deliberation” In Meetings, contributions tend to follow a few simple rules. Friends are advised, especially in larger Meetings, to limit repetition as the Meeting is generally not interested in any numerical counting system in order to reach unity (Sheeran, 1983). Furthermore, oratory, rhetoric or politically-charged contributions are seldom welcomed. Sheeran (1983:58) also notes that the role of monitoring one’s emotions plays a key role in the Meeting, and Friends often try to recognise and temper their emotions in order that contributions remain neutral and to encourage a wide participation in the corporate discernment process. Sheeran (1983:55) helpfully uses the analogy of musical compositions to describe the process, highlighting that contributions are musical notes that, once assembled, create a musical composition that best represents the will of God.

Rather than compiling a list of pros and cons, or employing a form of numerical counting system, the Clerks are still responsible for judging the “weight” of each contribution by discerning the movement of the Spirit (Grace, 2000). The Clerk may decide that some Friends have more wisdom on a particular issue than others, and should therefore carry more weight. However, weighting the contributions is not an easy process for the Clerk. For instance, Bishop (2006:4) highlights that “Quakers often struggle to balance the idea that every voice needs to be heard with the reality that the process of weighing means every voice does not contribute equally. Good communication, clear relationships, and a shared commitment to seek God’s voice above all else are all necessary for such corporate weighing to be effective”. A further difficulty for the Clerk is how to weigh-up the contributions of those who remain silent, and this is often done creating a cooperative and caring atmosphere to draw those Friends into the discussion, and not to over-rely on contributions from experienced and respected Friends. Bishop (2006:4-5) highlights the problem:

“Someone may have the reputation of speaking with spiritual weight, or may be asked to shoulder positional responsibilities because of the weightiness of their words, but even words from these people must be weighed every time they are shared. The gathered community never knows when a normally Spirit-sensitive person might be having a distracted day, or be thrown off-balance by a personal issue. True spiritual weight is recognized in the moment, as the Holy Spirit confirms the truth of the words by Scripture and within the hearts of others”.

Once those present have contributed, the Clerk will offer a minute that reflects the sense of the meeting. Anderson (2006:42-43) notes that “...offering a Sense of the Meeting becomes something of a summary of where the group feels a oneness of accord on both the identification of the issues to be addressed and what might be “the mind of Christ” in addressing those issues”. Following the minute, those present may then deliberate further on whether it adequately reflects the sense of the meeting, and if not, this may lead the Clerk to suggest an amendment to the minute before it is finally agreed by the Meeting. Although rare, the minute may take a few iterations to reflect the sense of the meeting. Brigham & Kavanagh (2015:15) highlight that the process “...is “...axiomatic that the clerk clerks best when everyone is clerking together” . .

Unlike contemporary business meetings, the Clerk makes sure the Meeting understands what is being approved *at the time the decision is made*. Once agreed, Cranmer (2003) highlights that Friends often signify assent by the traditional response, 'I hope so' ('Approve' in the USA).

Why do many Quakers say 'I hope so' after a draft minute is accepted? Mace 2012: 120) writes: "I think it means to pay respect to the presence in the empty chair ... it's an expression with an element of provisionality about it ... I am trusting our discernment has taken us to this place, but I am recognising that we might not have"

Anderson (2006, 42-43) summarises the benefits of the process in terms of participant understanding and ownership, highlighting that "Decisions that are both understood and collectively owned have a far greater chance of being carried out with missional success than do quickly made decisions that are mandated by a dominant individual or group". In other words, unitive decisions in the manner of Friends are often more likely to be implemented with good grace, imbued, as they are, with the will of God. The process of writing and agreeing minutes in real-time sits in stark contrast to the process in typical Business Meetings where minutes are often produced by the Secretary after the meeting, and then accepted as correct at the following meeting. While perhaps a quicker process, this approach can have serious drawbacks, of course. For example, the people approving the minutes at a following meeting might be different from those at the original meeting. Second, the minutes sometimes turn out to be a version of what should have been said rather than what actually was. Third, the need to approve the minutes at a subsequent meeting can sometimes allow all the original issues to be raised again⁸. In Meetings for Business, however, the minutes, once approved, become authoritative. Thus, minute-writing and minute-taking are crucial to QBM and are imbued as a spiritual practice rather than simply a clerical function. Those who were not present accept the decision of the Meeting as God's will. However, the process of corporate discernment is never free of human imperfection, and 'new Light' may be found on an issue at a future date (Grace, 2006). A sense of the meeting can often only be achieved by the Clerk when those participating respect and care for one another (Grace, 2006). The process requires humility, and according to Grace (2006), a purity of motive. Sheeran (1983:61) suggests that "The emphasis is on acceptance of one another, mutual respect, avoidance of the manipulative conduct which rhetorical style often hides, a sense of the partiality of one's own insights, and one's dependence on searching together with the group for better conclusions than anyone alone could have attained". However, that is to say Friends should not remain silent for the 'sake' of unity, however. If a Friend disagrees with what is being said, or has serious reservations about it, then Friends have a duty to say so. Otherwise, the Clerk can easily misread the sense of the meeting.

Some drawbacks to overcome

Despite my optimism for its potential benefits, QBM undoubtedly takes more time and patience. It is no place for forced deadlines and the pressure of time. Indeed, perhaps one of the greatest challenges in transferring the process to contemporary business organisations is the time commitment of participants to corporately discern the 'best' decision or outcome. Though the process may take a time commitment, it is entirely possible that implementation following the decision may occur more quickly as a result because time was invested up-front in discerning unity and securing commitment. As Adrian Cadbury (2003) recalled "in industrial relations...it often meant considerable time spent in debate and argument, but it also meant that decisions once arrived at could be implemented quickly and with commitment".

Friends are often asked what happens when unity is not discerned. In simple terms, should unity not be discerned, no change to the state of affairs is made, or when in doubt, wait!

⁸ I am grateful to Bill Waghorn for these points, drawn from an unpublished working paper on the Quaker Business Method for Quakers & Business.

(Sheeran, 1983). It is possible that allowing more time to reflect on the matter at hand may help unity to be discerned in the future. Gentry (1982:234) highlight the tension at the heart of corporate discernment and unity:

“If the Inner Light is within each person but consensus is a group process, then a natural tension should be expected. The presence of natural tension or conflict is explained by suggesting that the Spirit has not as yet been sufficiently found in all members of the group. Quakers have built in several techniques to manage conflict. Uniquely, Quakers use a period of silence in which members consider their own and others' views. During this period, self-interests which may impede seeking the Inner Light are to be set aside.”

Despite the use of silence and more time, it may remain difficult to achieve unity and taken as a sign that God's will has not been discerned (Grace, 2006). Sheeran (1983:66-70) identifies three different types of 'dissent' to unity: (1) 'I disagree but do not wish to stand in the way'; (2) 'please minute me as opposed'; and, (3) 'I am unable to unite with the proposal'. The first type of dissent is probably the most common, and is an act of sensitivity to the integrity of the process to preserve unity. Requesting a minute as being opposed to the decision is a stronger opposition to the emergent unity, while it still recognises that the objection should not stand in the way of the proceedings. As Sheeran (1983:69) notes, “its use leaves the meeting free to proceed but also tends to make the group more reluctant...”

Refusing to unite and stand aside is the most severe form of objection. However, Grace (2006:51) highlights that Friends should consider the validity of the corporate discernment process so that:

“When a Friend feels he or she must “stand in the way” of Unity, the Meeting and the Friend will patiently labor together in hopes of coming to a truer understanding of God's will. However, individuals do not hold a power of veto, and should be ready to recognize the validity of corporate leadings and to submit to them if conscience allows, being recorded in the minutes as standing aside.”

Where a Friend is unwilling to stand aside, the Clerk will often delay the decision until a later Meeting, and Friends, such as Elders and other experienced and respected Friends, may, between Meetings, discuss the objection with the dissenting Friend. A few possible outcomes are possible. First, it may be possible that the Friend is subsequently able to reach unity as the Friends' respect for the judgements of experienced Friends may often ease the disagreement. Second, the dissention of the Friend may cause other participants of the Meeting to reflect whether they were in fact mistaken. Thirdly, it is possible that that if unity cannot be reached after sufficient discussion, the Clerk may disregard any option to block the sense of the meeting by objection. In that case, the dissenter can either to stand aside, or to have one's name recorded in opposition.

What about the common drawbacks of QBM? Like any other human process, QBM relies upon Friends' integrity towards it. Grace (2006:52) highlights that criticisms of the process are often based on human imperfections:

“Most Friends are painfully aware of how our human nature falls short of the spiritual ideal, and of how fragile our process can seem. Corporate discernment of the will of God is a risky and imperfect proposition. In relying so extensively on the Holy Spirit, we make ourselves vulnerable to pitfalls and failures...”

However, according to Grace, “...Far from being a weakness, such vulnerability is central to our understanding of the power of worship (and business) “in spirit and in truth”. Human imperfections can take an almost infinite number of forms, however the most common are likely to be the risk of falling into the trap of compromise, rather than discerning the will of God. For example, Sheeran (1983:54) refers to Friends resorting to decisions that are the lowest common denominator, or the easiest path to follow that achieves unity. In contrast, Dandelion highlights that some Friends may feel alienated by the theocracy of the process and “...participants can feel marginalised or silenced by a decision taken without them or by a clear majority” Dandelion (2002:217). There are also strong social pressures to discern unity. For example, where a Friend cannot unite with a decision and ‘stands in the way’, social pressures may increase exponentially across time as decisions are delayed. Elders and other respected Friends may also exert a strong social influence to conform to the corporate discernment process. The Clerk is also in a unique position to influence the decision-making process. Consciously or unconsciously, the Clerk may organise the agenda, mould the proceedings or draft a minute that reflects his or her personal view of the decision at hand. Thus, Meetings for Business are by no means immune from human manipulation and it is entirely possible that what carries most weight is the personal reputation of the Friend addressing the Meeting.

Friends often emphasise the importance of the integrity of the process over the product (i.e., the decision) (Grace, 2006). While this can have benefits, it can also sometimes hamstring the process itself. For example, in an edition of *The Friend*, Beeson (2015:13) highlights that there is a strong risk that Friends see the purpose of a Meeting for Business as to discern a ‘minute’, whereas the primary purpose is to address an issue. In fact, Beeson argues that QBM would be improved if it allowed more time for exploratory, discovery and deliberative phases, stressing the advantages of holding threshing meetings prior to a more formal Meeting for Business.

The Future

In these concluding remarks, I argue that QBM may be transferable as a decision-making process to many contemporary business meetings. At its heart, QBM balances the creativity and leadings of individuals with a ‘testing’ role of the Meeting (Michealis 2010:17). With many contemporary businesses striving to find new ways to improve engagement and participation throughout the organisation, and ultimately to make better decisions, such a collaborative and unitive decision-making process should be of interest to practitioners, where Friends or non-Friends.

Most Friends would agree that QBM has a spiritual dimension. However, some Friends, and non-Friends alike, have clear differences in personal theology and belief. This leads us to consider whether a secular organisational context would render the processes underpinning QBM of any value? Grace (2006:48) cautions that while Friends may frown at the idea that QBM is simply a *process or technique*, it is perhaps the dimensions of cooperation and trust that lies at the heart of QBM that can in fact make a contribution to the challenges faced by

business organisations. Ultimately, QBM “...nurture(s) a culture of listening, enabling participants to achieve a shared understanding of a complex situation and of other people’s positions and perspectives on it. [The] Quaker business method...is a unique process that can develop solidarity around a collective way forward” (Michaelis, 2010:17). In other words, even in secular contexts, it is entirely conceivable that QBM as a process, rather than as a spiritual practice, can be used by individuals and teams in organisations who find “...in Truth the best aspirations of man...” (Sheeran, 1983:73). Again, Sheeran (1983:78) makes a useful observation that for many Friends who deemphasise the Christian theological roots of QBM, the process of decision-making remains strongly associated with trust and a shared desire for unity.

In an online article for Forbes, Lewis (2009) interviewed Margaret Benefiel, author of *Soul at Work: Spiritual Leadership in Organizations*, who suggests that

“I think that managers can adapt certain elements and the guiding spirit of the Quaker business meeting to their purposes”, including “a quiet, reflective frame of mind, mutual respect, [and] the idea that no one person has all the truth, but must listen deeply to others to gain a fuller picture of the truth. Studies show that half of management decisions fail. Quaker practices can help managers make better decisions.”

Lewis also interviewed David Hurst, author of *Crises and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change*, who highlights that:

“I suppose that on a very small scale, if you are trying to get people who already trust each other somewhat to express real concerns or come up with different ideas, it can help to think about starting a meeting without an agenda and in silence. The pressure of silence is immense, so you can’t just spring it on an unsuspecting group. They have to know it is coming and what the objective is. A complete change in physical context from the office environment might help too.”

The key point is that contemporary businesses may find benefits in using at least some component parts of QBM, if not the entire process or the theology. For example, Pollard (1954:8) suggests that:

“What can be used easily in other bodies is the absence of voting, the requirement of unanimity, discussion in an atmosphere of conciliation rather than domination, the occasional use of periods of silence and the adjournment of discussion. It is more important to get the correct decision than to get a decision by a certain time.”

While I may be charged with being over-optimistic as to the transferability of QBM to other face-to-face decision-making settings, the rapid emergence of remote or online decision-making practices in contemporary organisations raises particular issues for advocates of QBM. Many Friends use technology to explore Quaker practice, learn, study and participate in online

Meetings for Worship. However, the use of remote technologies also raises the question of whether corporate discernment can operate in the presence of such technological advances? Michaelis (2010) observes that, perhaps ironically, there has been little corporate discernment about how technology may affect the practice of Friends. Indeed, as you would expect, there is no mention of the internet or social media in *Quaker Faith & Practice* (1994). Quaker Life (2012) has published guidance for Friends on conducting telephone conference meetings, although similar guidance would cover internet-enabled conferencing as well. The guidance states that:

“Experience shows that we can maintain the worshipping spirit of our Quaker business meetings very well over the telephone. It does require us to be alert to seeking the most appropriate ways to ensure right ordering and discernment, according to the circumstances. Teleconferencing is very effective when dealing with routine business or any matters that do not need threshing or extended consideration. Difficult matters needing lengthy discernment are clearly best handled face-to-face... It may often be helpful for (sub-)committees to meet by teleconference. One simple factor is key to maintaining confidence in Quaker discernment by telephone conferencing: while the method has been adapted to a new medium, the principles of the Quaker business meeting remain unchanged. As in other business meetings, we need to plan properly, to agree the process for the meetings, and to allow time for all participants to learn how it works” (Quaker Life, 2012:4-5)

The use of conferencing technologies therefore has a number of significant benefits for Friends. For example, Quaker Life (2012:5) highlight the benefits of holding remote meeting where it is impractical to hold face-to-face meetings such as geographic distance, and it can help reduce costs and lower carbon footprints. Adding to these benefits, it may also be helpful for groups of Friends with shared interests, regionally, nationally or internationally to conduct meetings. In addition, new technologies such as You Tube have assisted communicating the ‘Quaker way’ to new audiences globally, such as the videos on the practice of Friends by QuakerSpeak. In fact, Barnett (2015) highlights that “In some ways this echoes the vigorous pamphleteering of early Friends, which made use of the new communications technology of the printing press to create a new participatory culture of religious publishing”. However, despite these benefits, Sheeran (1983:60) notes that Friends find the discipline of QBM more difficult when communication is not held face-to-face. Sheeran’s study of Friends, held in the early-1980s, revealed that Friends expressed anxiety about how remote decision-making undermines the spiritual practice of Friends. In the 1980s, of course, modern remote technology was the ‘phone! Today, of course, technology encompasses internet services such as Skype and video-conferencing which may change the nature of the experience and the practice again, and Friends need to be open to receive ‘new Light’ on communication technologies.

In a contemporary business context, the emergence of new communication technologies may put a further obstacle in front of the use of QBM. On the one hand, with many secular organisations under pressure from shareholders to maximise shareholder value and to be socially responsible in its use of fossil fuels by limiting unnecessary travel, the use of new communication technologies may only be set to increase further in the future. For many Friends, on the other hand, a Meeting for Worship or Meeting for Business is a collective and physical form of worship which requires us to place our whole physical being in the presence

of God. It seems highly likely that participating in an online Meeting for Worship or Meeting for Business may be experienced as significantly different from a collective and physically-present form of worship. Barnett (2015) highlights that “Meeting together in virtual space, we can scarcely avoid presenting a persona that is only a fragment of who we are as whole people” and continues “In modern times...there is a widespread assumption that any differences between long-distance and face-to-face relationships are relatively trivial, and that text-based communication or Skype conversations are effectively equivalent to meeting in person. This seems to neglect the extent to which who we are, is not fully reflected by our written words. It is intimately bound up with our embodied presence”. However, on the reverse side of the coin, online Meetings for Worship may be a useful innovation to help geographically-distant Friends incorporate the spiritual practice of Friends into their daily lives. Indeed, online Meetings for Worship can be used to develop spiritual community in international communities of Friends, Friends’ special interest groups, and to supplement attendance at physically-present Meetings. Of course, different uses are numerous and varied. For example, in the U.S, where perhaps online Meetings are used more extensively, the focus can be to explore issues of interest to Friends, or as a communication tool within or across Area Meetings, such as the use of telephone conferencing across the geographically-diverse area of West Scotland.

One question that arises is whether the absence of physical presence significantly reduces the sense of spiritual and collective worship as noted by Barnett (2015), and where online Meetings for Worship can be transferred to Meetings for Business, and beyond into the business world? Different views no doubt abound. However, despite the potential drawbacks of online Meetings, the possibility of a sense of community and spiritual solidarity may still exist for some irrespective of the virtual space, time zones and geography. Perhaps simply knowing that individual Friends are gathering for a Meeting for Worship is encouraging and energising enough? Advocates of online Meetings for Worship think so. For example, Mendoza (2014) hopes that “the online presence of Friends will be what it has been offline: small, but potent.... The Spirit can lead us to a better use of technology...” Martin Layton⁹, Senior Programme Leader at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, is currently experimenting with online Meetings and suggests that “Like any worshipping community, it takes time to know and trust each other – and to some extent virtual meetings are faced with new barriers to this – but even at this early stage in our experiment, we are finding that relatively simple technologies can be more than just a superficial means of contact for isolated worshippers, and that they can offer a space where an authentic sense of presence can be sought and found.”

Despite arguments that online Meetings for Worship remain authentic to the spirituality of Friends, the process dimension of an online Meeting for Worship, of course, is likely to require a different set of processes than physically-present Meetings. For example, while a Clerk may still steward proceedings, online Meetings often require strict adherence to a set of rules for joining the Meeting so that the silence is not continually disrupted by Friends joining or leaving the Meeting. Furthermore, ministry remains possible via commenting using the computer keyboard or touch-screen and sharing with participants. The risk of course, is well-argued by Barnett (2015) that:

⁹ Via personal communication

“An essential element of local community is that we cannot evade accountability for our words and actions. In our Quaker meetings we know that what we do and say will have potentially long-lasting consequences for our relationships with each other, which may affect our lives beyond the Meeting House. Purely online relationships do not necessarily have this characteristic. Participants in an online group or discussion can instantly disappear, and may choose to be anonymous or adopt an alternative identity. It is this capacity for anonymity, combined with the increased potential for misunderstandings and lack of contextual information that encourages such widespread hostility and argumentativeness in online discussions, including in Quaker forums.”

New communication technologies continue to emerge and evolve and Friends are only beginning to understand how their use may affect spiritual discipline and sense of community. Online Meetings for Worship are one step in a new technological direction, however online Meetings for Business are a further step that many Friends have yet to take. Whether physically-present or on-line, it seems reasonable to assume that decision-making the ‘Quaker way’ in business organisations may remain possible for ‘simple’ decisions, but its potential to aid complex or contentious decisions remains untested. Moreover, as the use of new communication technologies continue to proliferate in society, advocates of online QBM cannot currently point to many examples of its successful use either within or outwith the Religious Society of Friends. It seems apparent to me that further discernment (and indeed, research) is required to understand how QBM can improve decision-making in contemporary organisations, whether face-to-face or on-line. It is entirely possible that QBM remains a decision-making process of the future rather than the past.

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